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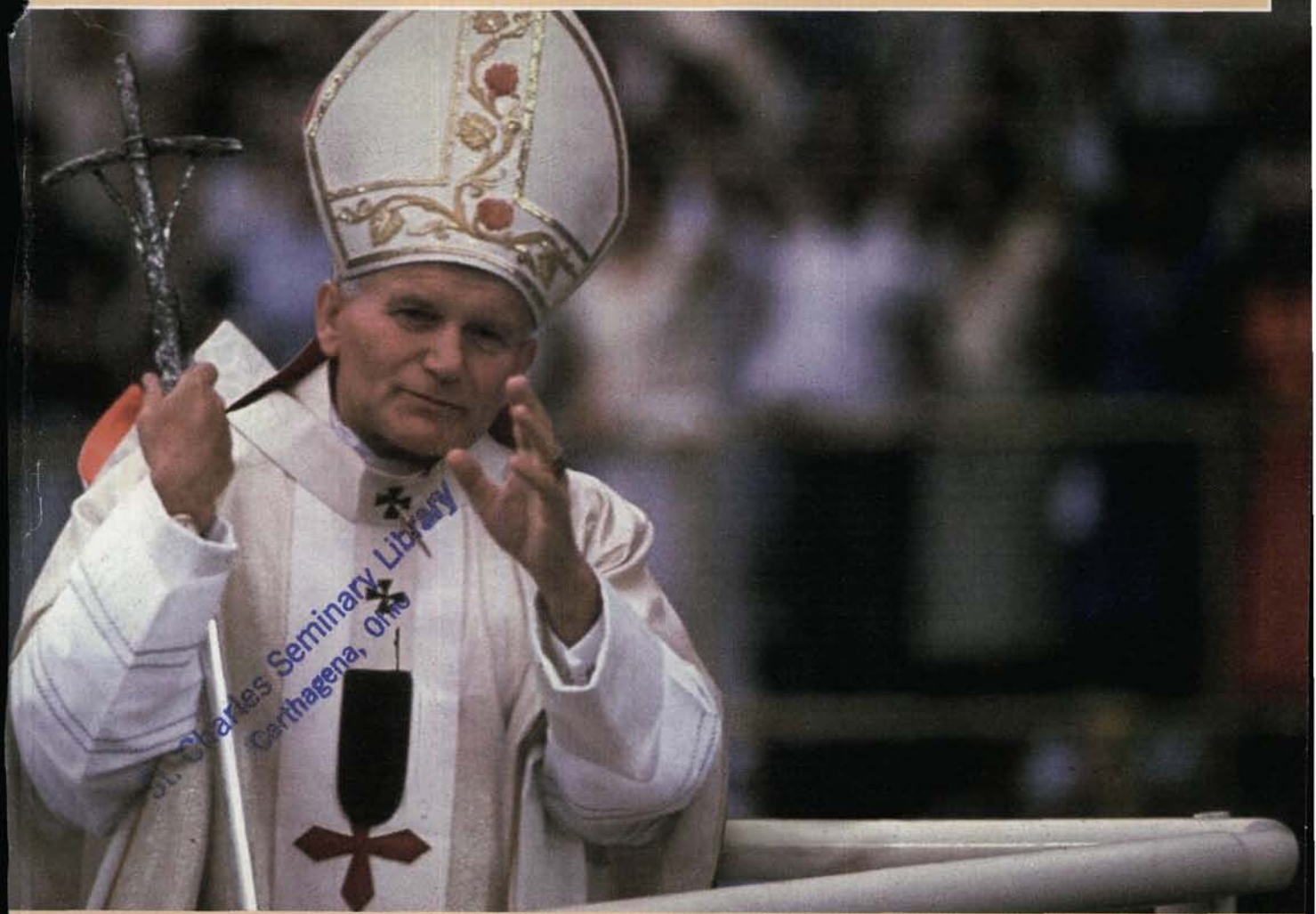
COMMONWEAL

A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture

October 22, 1999



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To the Editors

A pertinent poem

Though there is no indication of Hank Johnson's home base, his poem "Behind the Basilica" [September 10] is a lyrical and profoundly relevant comment on the current controversy concerning the removal of the soup kitchen "Our Daily Bread" and its unsightly guests from its location next to, if not behind, the Basilica of the Assumption in downtown Baltimore. Thanks to Hank Johnson and *Commonweal*.

JEAN GARTLAN
Baltimore, Md.

Death penalty defended

It is unfortunate that an interesting profile ["Doyle for the Defense," August 13] included misleading information on the death penalty.

Kevin Doyle, New York's chief capital defender, is concerned for the poor and minorities "who will inevitably line death row," claiming he believes the punishment is racist because more minorities than whites are on death row.

Mr. Doyle, clearly an expert on this subject, must know that minorities commit the majority of murders in the United States. Further, white murderers are twice as likely to be executed for the crime as are black murderers. And white murderers are executed seventeen months more quickly than are convicted black murderers. The racist death penalty is a myth used by those willing to adopt any means, however despicable, to do away with this most deserved punishment. As for poverty, there is no evidence that wealthy capital murderers are less likely to be executed than their poorer ilk. And one should note that only one-tenth of 1 percent of all murderers are executed.

Mr. Doyle's claim that New York state "has wrongfully executed more people than any other state" appears to be derived from a 1987 study whose authors later (1988) stated: " We agree with our critics that we have not proved these executed defendants to be innocent; we never claimed that we had."

I am disappointed, but not surprised, that the article contained no mention of and showed no concern for murder victims—innocent human beings who had loves and lives willfully destroyed, regardless of economics, race, or ethnicity—destroyed by our most heinous human-rights violators: capital murderers. DUDLEY SHARP
Houston, Tex.

The writer is vice-president of Justice for All, a Texas-based criminal justice reform organization.

Kevin Doyle replies:

Dudley Sharp goes 0 for 3. First, on race: In Philadelphia an African-American murder defendant, when compared to his similarly situated nonblack counterpart, is 38 percent more likely to receive a death sentence. So shows a study published last year in the *Cornell Law Review*. Even assuming minorities commit a majority of murders, how is it that our federal death row is not even a quarter white? Why since 1988 have 74 percent of those targeted for federal capital prosecution been minorities?

Then there is the impact of the victim's race. In 1990, Congress's General Accounting Office, after reviewing twenty-eight studies based on twenty-three sets of data, concluded: "In 82 percent of the studies, race of the victim was found to influence the likelihood of being charged with capital murder or receiving the death penalty; that is, those who murdered whites were found more likely to be sentenced to death than those who murdered blacks." When I went to Alabama that

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75 COMMONWEAL

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COMMONWEAL

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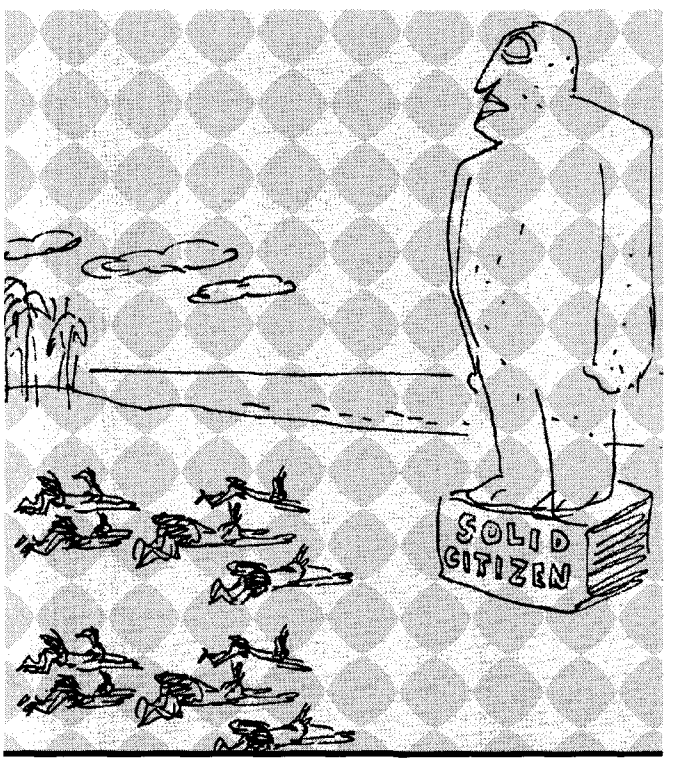

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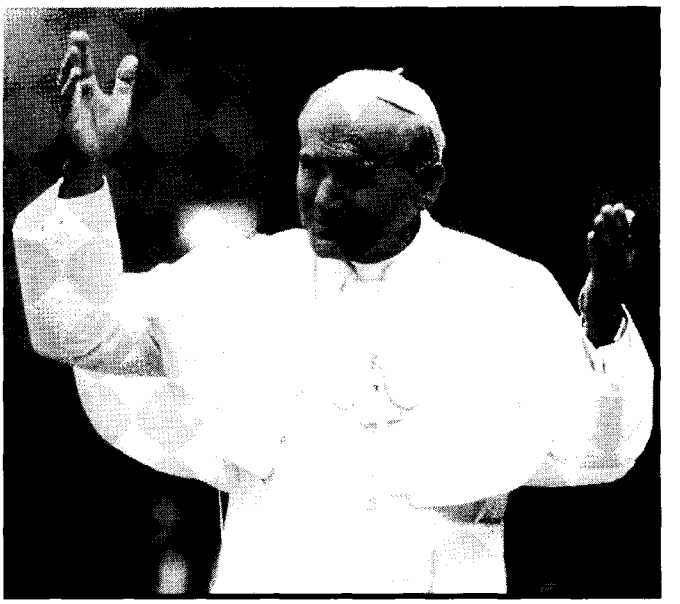

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same year, I wasn't surprised to find a death row on which roughly 80 percent of the death sentences arose from the killing of white people—even though most homicide victims in Alabama were black.

Second, concerning class bias, look at the elements of capital murder throughout the country, state by state. Typically, the eighteen-year-old product of chaos and poverty who panics holding up the 7-11 is capitally liable. The middle-class fellow who kills the person he once promised to "love, honor, and cherish" does not ordinarily face the death penalty.

But reading statistics is boring, so let's make this more interesting. If Mr. Sharp will agree, I will give one dollar to his organization for every current capital appellant he finds represented by retained counsel, on the condition that Mr. Sharp agrees to donate twenty-five cents to Alabama's Equal Justice initiative for every current capital appellant I can point to who has assigned or volunteer counsel. Deal?

Third, my reference to New York's wrongful executions relied, in part, on the published work of two scholars who indeed, given time's passage, could only show the grave reasons to doubt the guilt of persons long dead. Admittedly, I think it wrongful to execute people when there is substantial doubt about their guilt. KEVIN DOYLE

Take it from Scripture

In an otherwise thoughtful essay ["Sexuality and Homosexuality," September 10], Sidney Callahan makes two common errors regarding church teaching on homosexuality. First, this teaching does not, as Ms. Callahan writes, derive from the church's view that biological procreation is the defining characteristic of human sexuality. Rather, the church's teaching that homosexual activity is inherently sinful comes from more than three thousand years of received Judeo-Christian tradition; it is firmly based on both Old Testament law and Pauline discourse on what it means to live as a Christian. It is this divinely inspired, and thus infallible, moral teaching of Scripture that true Catholic exegesis both refuses to diverge from and attempts to explain in rational terms.

Given the centrality of this clear scriptural teaching, no one can in good conscience dissent from it. An act of homosexual sex is sinful not because the church says so but because God says so. The primacy of conscience is not a blank check to rewrite God's word to suit modern, secular sensibilities.

Ms. Callahan also engages in some gratuitous boo-hooing by stating that "experiencing erotic love and sexual joy in committed unions of mutual self-giving is uniquely human and a gift from God." The scriptural standard for sexual union isn't a mutually self-giving, committed union, which sounds too much like a way to justify fornication. The scriptural standard is marriage, defined by Jesus Christ as one man and one woman joined indissolubly by God. And while sexual love is truly a gift from God, this hardly means that God is obliged to give that gift to everyone.

All in all, there is no "crisis in the development of doctrine," as Ms. Callahan says. There is simply the continual, ubiquitous crisis caused by people who, often with very good intentions, help pave the road to hell.

MARK L. CHANCE
Houston, Tex.

Forming a conscience

Sidney Callahan questions whether "...Catholics have the right in good conscience to dissent from teaching that is authoritatively taught but not infallibly defined." She is quick to state that the answer is "...yes and hardly needs to be reargued with references to the hierarchy of truths and the sacredness of conscience." Really? With a matter as sacred as conscience one might have hoped that the author would spare a few lines on the need to form and inform one's conscience in accord with church teaching, a word to two on the possibility of having an erroneous conscience, and some recognition that the task of conscience is to discover truth, not create it. Though the church's constant teaching regarding the morality of homosexual activity has not been infal-

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Intervention: when & how?

In the wake of international military intervention in East Timor, the cry was raised as it was in Kosovo: "If there, why not Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the Sudan, or for that matter, Algeria, Chechnya, and Dagestan?" Why get involved in one country, while leaving others, often in far worse condition, to the ravages of civil war and human-rights violations? There are three competing arguments among those who ask that question by way of criticizing the current "unprincipled" approach to when and where we act to end human-rights abuses. First, the question is asked by hawks who believe reliance on outside forces to resolve local conflicts is futile. Only a military victory by one party can ultimately resolve civic strife; someone must win and someone must lose, otherwise the war will simply be fought another day. Second, it is asked by those pacifists who oppose all military response. Pointing to the selective nature of such actions attests to the prejudicial, self-interested, or malevolent motives at play in choosing to act, for example, in Kosovo but not in Rwanda. Hence do not intervene at all. For different reasons then, both hawks and doves oppose military interventions. The third group, genuine interventionists including human-rights advocates, believe that all violent civil struggles and human-rights violations are created equal. Therefore, international action ought to be taken almost everywhere to stop slaughter and ruin, whether it is born of ethnic and religious rivalries or internal political divisions. The principle of intervention should be universal and uncompromising.

No one of these strategies is likely to be soon implemented—and recent history shows why. For understandable reasons, including the continuing power of the nation-state, an erratic and "unprincipled" course will mark international responses to civil war and human-rights violations for some time to come.

To intervene or not, when to act and how to act, are complex questions in a world in gradual transition from the inviolability to the permeability of the nation-state, a change fostered by instant communications and a slowly growing international consensus that human rights should trump national sovereignty. These were the themes of Secretary General Kofi Annan in opening the current session of the United Nations in September. He offers a sober analysis to those who would like to see established universal principles of humanitarian intervention. As an active interventionist himself, perhaps he sees the obstacles more clearly than most.

His address highlights three reasons for the uneven response of the international community:

- Doubts about claims of national sovereignty and the attendant growth in human rights occur unevenly around the world. Even in the West, where such ideas have firm support, national interest is never far from the calculation of decision makers. So, for example, current Russian bombing of civilians in Chechnya is unlikely to bring an international outcry, much less intervention. Why? The lack of TV pictures, the precarious state of Russia itself, its veto on the Security Council, and the reluctance of the other major powers, especially the United States, to thwart Russian actions will leave the Chechens to fend for themselves. On the other hand, the UN was able finally to act in East Timor because the Indonesian government bowed to international pressure for intervention, especially from the United States,

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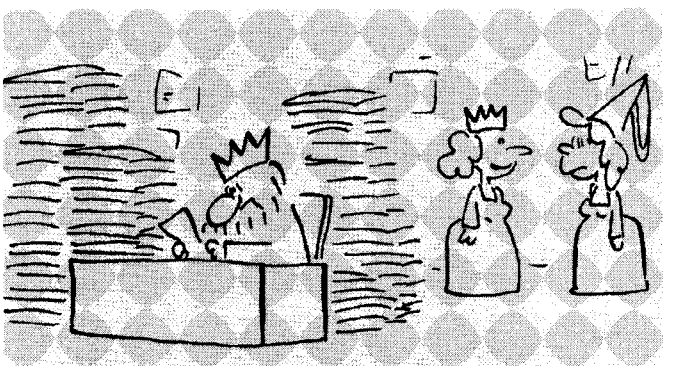
and Australia was willing to send troops. Thus, the unpredictable play of national interests, the uneven implementation of human-rights claims, the TV audience, and the valence of state sovereignty will shape the response of the UN, and of regional alliances such as NATO.

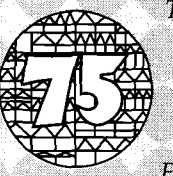
- The limited powers of the UN, especially the threat of a Security Council veto, necessarily constrain a rapid response. Thus, NATO intervened unilaterally in Kosovo. Annan asks: "Is there not a danger of such interventions...setting dangerous precedents for future interventions without a clear criterion to decide who might invoke these precedents, and in what circumstances?" Yet by making an analogy to Rwanda, he acknowledges the conundrum Kosovo posed to the UN: "If, in those dark days and hours leading up to the genocide, a coalition of states had been prepared to act..., but did not receive prompt council authorization, should such a coalition have stood aside and allowed the horror to unfold?" Certainly not. The principle of international unity is important to the secretary-general, but not important enough to stand in the way of a group of states ready to act on their own.
- That military intervention is the rule rather than the exception in international reactions to human-rights violations represents, in Annan's view, a "failure of prevention." He would redefine intervention to "include actions along a wide continuum from the most pacific to the most coercive," and proposes to move the UN from "a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention." If the secretary-general here seems to slip into a rhetoric of utopianism dependent on the development of an effective international governing body, he nonetheless follows the logic of those who support intervention, even if in limited form.

And that is where he, and we, and the world are stuck—somewhere between the recognition that human-rights violations cannot be ignored and a shortage of effective international mechanisms to remedy the civil strife that brings them about. The great challenge to the UN, and to those who have supported humanitarian interventions in Kosovo and East Timor, is to encourage the difficult move from coercion to conciliation. That is not so photogenic and dramatic as bombs and bullets, but if that is not what interventionists finally support, should we be intervening at all?



"Well, we're in for an era of peace—that's the paperwork from the last war."

From the archives



Throughout 1999, Commonweal *has been celebrating its 75th anniversary. Here from the May 29, 1953 issue is an excerpt from "Morals Makyth Movies," by the English Dominican, Gerald Vann.*

We are so accustomed to living in a world of man-made ugliness that it may never occur to us that ugliness of that sort means degradation and degradation is a moral evil. It may never occur to us that the wanton creation of ugliness is a sin, just as the wanton infliction of pain is a sin....Ugliness is evil; but the portrayal of ugliness need not be evil, for it may be beautiful, as when great artists paint the carnage of war or the horrors of our industrial cities. It is not the subject matter that makes a book or a picture ugly or beautiful, evil or good, but the mode of its portrayal. Thus there is not necessarily anything wrong in a "bedroom sequence" in a film: It depends on the sequence—and the bedroom. There is not necessarily anything wrong in portraying a bad priest, a murderer, a prostitute: It depends on the effect of the mode of portrayal....

Where the inculcating of false doctrine is concerned there are similar conceptions. The "edifying" film can purvey falsehood just as much as the disedifying one. It is wrong to persuade people through the medium of film that murder or suicide are justified; but it is also wrong to persuade them that Christianity transformed into magic or superstition is a good thing; it is wrong to make them want to be honest because honesty is shown as being always the best policy, or to make them want to be saints because sanctity, as portrayed, is so glamorous.

If the church has been, through its long history, a civilizing influence in the world, it is because Christianity is concerned not with the soul merely but with the whole human personality. The ugliness which surrounds us is, in the last analysis, the effect of evil; and a not negligible part of the church's work in the world consists in attempting to remedy that situation, and to sanctify material things.

GERALD VANN

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JO McGOWAN

MOY MOY'S JOURNEY

Nearing the end

Ten days ago, our pediatrician told us that our little girl, Moy Moy, aged ten, probably has only a few months left to live. We have always known her life would be short, but hearing it put in terms of months left me feeling desperate for air. In these gray nightmarish days, I have to consciously fight the panic that keeps overwhelming me: Driving, I find myself suddenly gripping the wheel so tightly it hurts, stunned once again by the reality of the doctor's words. Buying vegetables, I stand staring at the carrots in a trance, unable to remember what they are or why I am looking at them.

I can't count the number of times I have sat down to write this column—always about something else—and been unable to proceed. There is nothing else. In my life, the only thing that matters right now is that my daughter is dying.

I spoke with her godfather on the phone the other day and he said we had to make the most of the time we have left. "Don't get distracted," he warned me. "She can teach you everything you need to know."

This is true, and though it worries me sometimes that I may be deifying her, when I need guidance now it is not to God that I turn but to her (in spite of the fact that she cannot speak and has the mind, they say, of a six-month-old). I reflect on her life and I find all the answers I need.

Some of them, obviously, concern her. When our doctor brought up the question of tube feeding, it was Moy Moy who helped us to decide that it wasn't the right thing to do. Before she began to decline, she was the biggest eater in our family. She loved food, and just the mention of her favorites would send her into raptures (pumpkin pie, we would whisper, and watch her squeal with delight). As her illness progressed, she became less and less interested in food, closing her mouth emphatically as the spoon approached and turning her head firmly to one side. But the words still elicited the old response. It mystified us. We would ask her if she wanted ice cream and she would literally shout with joy, but when we tried to feed her, she would clamp her mouth shut and refuse even a tiny taste. Finally my husband realized that the words probably sparked a happy memory for her and it was that she was responding to. The actual food was now meaningless.

This understanding was, for me, an unexpected gift, a small glimpse into the realm Moy Moy now occupies more and more fully. She is dying to us, but she is also coming alive in an entirely new way, entering a world in which the mundane things we believe are so important are actually dispensable. To force her to continue to partake of them when she is so clearly moving on to "real food" seems to me to be an insult to her and the journey she has begun.

I received another answer very late one Saturday night. My husband and I had planned a trip the next day to the small mountain town of Mussoorie, an hour from where we live. We were going with a grim task in hand: We wanted to make the arrangements for Moy Moy's burial in a cemetery there. (In India, because almost everyone is cremated, cemeteries are often horribly neglected places. The one in Dehra Doon, where we live, has hogs running wild through it and homeless people sleeping on the tombs. The one in Mussoorie, which has a large Christian population, is beautifully maintained and very close to the place where Moy Moy's birth parents live.)

That night, after everyone had gone to bed, I sat on the couch thinking about the next day's plan. All of a sudden it hit me that it wasn't a theoretical discussion—it was real. We were going to dig a hole and bury her, put her little body into the ground, cover it with earth and leave her there. She would be alone, she whom we had cherished and protected for ten years. I began weeping and soon was in such a state I could not stop. I didn't think it was possible to cry for so long. It just went on and on in shuddering sobs and I found it difficult to breathe. What finally calmed me down was remembering Moy Moy. I pictured her, surprisingly, not in a peaceful moment, but in the middle of one of her really bad convulsions.

What happens when she has a seizure is that her whole body, especially her face, gets contorted and rigid. Her arms and legs jerk uncontrollably and her eyes roll back in her head. But painful as it is to watch, we often end up laughing and hugging her because even in the midst of it all, there she is trying to smile at us. It was that small smile, that brave effort to comfort us that came back to me as I sat on the couch lost in grief, and the lessons it conveyed were almost too deep for words.

It told me that the pain would come, often and hard and in inconvenient places (Moy has had her seizures everywhere—in trains, on the road, in church, in stores, and she simply submits to them), but that it would stop and that happiness was still possible. It told me that even in the worst of times, remembering those around us and what they are going through, makes the worst get better. And it told me that there is a core of self that we keep in spite of what happens to us and that it is up to us to choose who we are.

The last lesson is perhaps the most important. Since the very beginning, Moy Moy has been a charming and enchanting child. She draws people to her in some mysterious way that none of us has been able to understand. As her dependence on others has increased, her sweetness and winning ways have, too. Taking care of her now means changing diapers, wiping drool, administering pills, holding her through seizures,

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and carrying her. But in spite of these difficulties, there has never been a shortage of willing helpers, nor do any of us consider it a burden.

She has been one of the great joys of our lives and the reason, I believe, is love. Her godmother asked me a few days ago what I thought Moy Moy's purpose in life was and the answer came to me so quickly I hesitated to say it for fear it was too glib. But in fact, it was an answer so deep and so true it came to me as easily as if she had asked me my name. What Moy has done has been to show us that love can redeem anything. With none of the gifts the rest of us take for granted—speech, mobility, intelligence, freedom—she has nonetheless transformed her world.

She gives love constantly and unconditionally, and she receives it in the same way: without comment or expectation or judgment. Watching the way she accepts what people have to offer has taught me that giving and receiving can be the same thing and that one begets the other. But even more important, it has taught me that there is nothing else worth doing, nowhere else to go. □

Joseph Policano

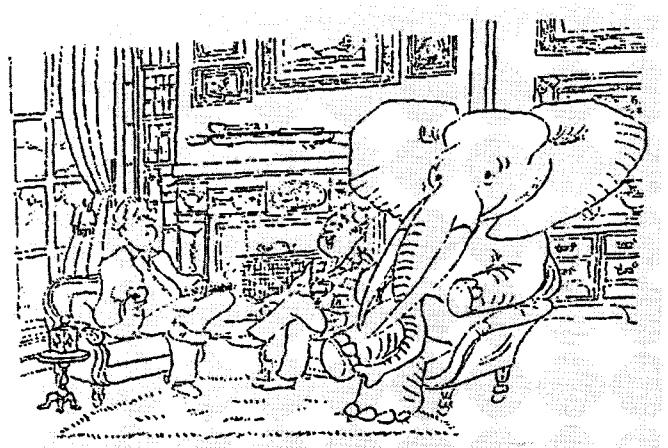
PARDON US

The Clintons & the FALN

How could two brilliant politicians like Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton create the fiasco surrounding the clemency decision for twelve Puerto Rican nationalists who were serving sentences up to ninety years for "terrorist" crimes in the 1970s and '80s in which no one was injured, no shots were fired, and no bombs went off?

The Puerto Rican FALN members were convicted of having unlicensed firearms, transporting stolen vehicles across state lines, and conspiring to commit sedition; certainly not acts deserving suspended sentences but not, in effect, life sentences either. Their continued imprisonment generated a lot of sympathy in Puerto Rico, but this was not an issue that would send its citizens to the barricades.

President Clinton said the sole reason for his clemency offer (if they forswore violence) was the harshness of the sentences. That makes sense. The Puerto Rican nationalists convicted of storming the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1950s and wounding many legislators had received similar sentences for far more terrible crimes.



"I didn't have the heart to shoot him!"

With Hillary Clinton about to make history by becoming the first First Lady to run for office, pundits claimed the clemency offer was to keep Puerto Rican voters in her camp. That's far fetched. The release of the FALN twelve is not the single issue on Puerto Ricans' agenda that would make them turn to New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Mrs. Clinton's anticipated opponent. In fact, it has become a major embarrassment in New York with many Puerto Ricans on talk shows lamenting their image of being bomb throwers and fanatics. Perhaps requests of Puerto Rican leaders, such as, Congressman Jose Serrano (D-N.Y.), and appeals from former president Jimmy Carter were enough to sway Mr. Clinton, who, in a recent years has freed only three convicts out of more than three thousand requests.

Was Vieques, the small island off Puerto Rico's coast used by the U.S. Navy for practice bombing runs and a real bone of contention, involved? Gary Tuominen, the news director for the English-language radio WOSO in San Juan, suspects that the president is preparing to turn down Puerto Rico's request to end the bombing and gave them the FALN releases as a sop.

Whatever the reasons, it certainly turned into a mess, and an almost laughable one at that as Mrs. Clinton first applauded the clemency offer then turned and ran as the firestorm threatened to engulf her. She says she and her husband never discussed the issue—though she didn't wag her finger at the television camera and say, "I never spoke with that man about freeing Puerto Rican terrorists." Incredible.

The issue certainly put a crimp in Mrs. Clinton's non-campaign (she has not officially announced) and removed some of the gloss from her. But it is a long way to election day and voters can be counted on to do two things: Forget quickly and love celebrity.

In delivering clemency, President Clinton, who is often pictured as a patsy, has once again shown he is as tough as any street fighter. He'll need that armor soon when he does something that will really aid Mrs. Clinton's campaign in New York: Release Jonathan Pollard, an act Israeli prime ministers and many influential members of the American Jewish community have sought. □

Joseph Policano's *"Puerto Rico: Will It Be the Fifty-first State?" appeared in the February 27, 1998 issue of* Commonweal.

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BILL BRADLEY'S MAGIC

It's not just hoop dreams

Wilson Carey McWilliams

Bill Bradley is running ahead of Al Gore in New Hampshire and New York, looking more and more like a candidate with a serious chance to win. Democratic leaders worry that Gore can't beat George W. Bush, and Republicans, partly to encourage a Democratic dogfight, are speaking of Bradley as the candidate they fear. (With reason: Matched against Bradley, Bush's soft support turns undecided, narrowing the race, and it's especially notable that, in a *Wall Street Journal* survey, Bradley led Bush among upper-income voters). If Bradley does well in the early primaries, particularly the March 7 contests in New York and California, even Gore's supporters will be having second thoughts. It's a long shot, but Bradley has made those before.

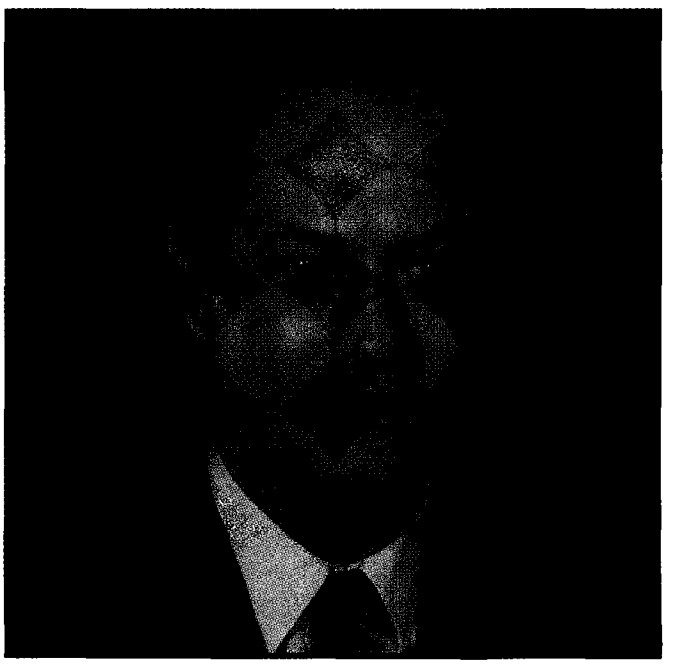
At first glance, Bradley's gains are a little mysterious. As a candidate, he's no poster boy: His speeches are earnest but monotonous and he tends to step on his applause lines. As Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* described him, he is a man with "a belly and a bald spot" who makes little attempt to conceal either, and who is apt to campaign wearing disreputable sneakers. It's hard not to wonder whether this artless shabbiness is really artful, an image designed to emphasize Bradley's rejection of a politics dominated by money and packaged campaigns, his promise of a "different way." In any case, it may be an asset, this election, that Bill Bradley is not slick.

So far, Bradley's fundamental appeal has been a simple negation: He is not Al Gore, and hence the only alternative for Democrats disaffected from Bill Clinton's administration. The impeachment crisis muted their criticism of the president, making Gore's nomination seem inevitable, but steadily, discontent has been recovering its voice. In April, almost two-thirds of Democrats in one poll were saying that they were "tired of all the problems associated with the Clinton administration," and in September, more Americans thought the country needed a "new direction" than were happy with things as they are.

Bradley has profited from the itch for change, but any coalition gets more fissiparous as it gets larger, and Bradley—who recently shared a platform with Al Sharpton and Ed Koch—will be increasingly hard-pressed to overcome the antipathies in his own camp.

Much of his support, of course, derives from distaste for the administration's aroma. Voters know that Al Gore is a straighter arrow than the president, but they remember his shilling in that Buddhist temple, and they question his failure to lay into the president after Clinton's deceptions were revealed. Professional political observers shrug this off: A vice-president with ambitions doesn't criticize his boss. To a great many Americans, however, this only demonstrates that Gore is "just another politician," willing to do whatever it takes to win. Hoping to blunt this perception, Gore has been trumpeting his religious beliefs, even waffling a little on creationism in the schools, but this approach hasn't been well received. Secularists are outraged, religious conservatives detect "theological shoplifting," and Gore's tactical contriving is evident all around. By contrast, Bradley's character is unshadowed; he has avoided "faith talk," working more subtly to associate himself with the virtues of an older, small-town America in which religion went without saying. Even so, the question of "values" will be tricky for Bradley, who is seeking to yoke more or less traditional moralists to the Democratic Left.

Of course, the Democrats' left wing is itself a crazy quilt. Orthodox liberals—for whom welfare reform and "don't ask, don't tell" rank high on the administration's list of sins—are



Wilson Carey McWilliams *teaches political science at Rutgers University.*

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never entirely at ease with labor Democrats, engrossed with the problems of employment and job quality. Still, left liberals and Old Democrats alike are natural parts of Bradley's constituency of discontent.

Prosperity has lessened misery, but the Clinton administration hasn't dented inequality and, to tell the truth, really hasn't tried. Increasingly evangelical about market economics and freer trade, it implicitly ranks gain above security, and Al Gore, so often the administration's champion, is tied by history and inclination to its technophilia and its enthusiasm for globalization. For the Democratic Left, especially the industrial unions, that stance is anathema, at least in part, because globalization shrinks the sphere of democratic self-government in favor of mercantile despotism (just as, for similar reasons, Americans across the ideological spectrum are troubled by how far the administration will go to conciliate a "trading partner" like China).

Bradley...is a natural aristocrat, identified as a potential president thirty-five years ago in a John McPhee New Yorker *profile, comfortable with the idea of power and less likely to be plagued by its demons.*

Bradley has had some success in appealing to such concerns, inspiring enough interest among the industrial unions to keep the AFL-CIO from endorsing either candidate at this stage of the game. But Bradley has a problem: In the Senate, he was a supporter of liberalized trade, and even sympathetic union leaders are pressed to find evidence that Bradley's trade policy would differ from Gore's. Bradley has tried to provide it, for example, by indicating opposition to the operation of foreign-owned trucks in the United States. Still, his room for maneuver is limited precisely because character is his Excalibur: An expedient abandoning of his earlier principles would lower him to the level of leaders whose convictions are notable chiefly for their flexibility.

Where his past is less confining—on campaign reform, on gun control, on racial and economic equality and the like—Bradley has been sending strong signals to the Left. But even if he wins over the Democratic Left (and there will be exceptions like Tom Hayden), it won't be enough.

To be nominated, and, even more, to be elected, Bradley will need support from the legions of Americans who are unhappy but unattached, like the younger voters who go virtually ignored by candidates and parties. And at times, observers catch hints that Bill Bradley, pedestrian rhetoric and all, may speak the language of enough of those Americans to revive civic life.

Bradley does have an odd, shambling kind of magic. David von Drehle, writing in the *Washington Post*, understood part of it: Bradley, he argued, is a natural aristocrat, identified as a potential president thirty-five years ago in a John McPhee *New Yorker* profile, comfortable with the idea of power and less likely to be plagued by its demons.

It may be even more important that, during his basketball years, it was a commonplace that Bradley "moved without the ball"—that is, that he was always in the game, seeing it as a whole, never letting his ego get in the way of his grander ambition. There are flashes of that quality in Bradley's politics. Refraining from criticizing Bill Clinton directly, he has remarked—correctly—that the oath of office makes the president into a public person, with a corresponding duty to subordinate his private needs and rights. Even Bradley's rather hokey invoking of his roots in Crystal City, Missouri, reflected his recognition of America's need for a common life, the "deeper prosperity" that comes from a sense of being in the great game of self-government. It's no wonder that so many Democrats are becoming intrigued by what Bill Bradley might do if he had the ball. □

In the October 1999 Issue of Theology Today!

"Mary is not only a model of the humble people of God and of faithful prayer, she also instructs the reader on how to approach the narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus."
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Wojtyla writ large, and long

Witness to Hope
The Biography of Pope John Paul II
George Weigel
HarperCollins, $35, 992 pp.

Eamon Duffy

No one can write an entirely successful biography of a living pope. Not only does the biographer lack access to fundamental sources such as diaries and private letters, but he is denied the perspective which only time—and death—can bring to any life. If he is a Catholic and sympathetic to his subject, he is further constrained by the glamour of the papal office. A living pope is always the greatest and best of men; but after death, as we used to be told in catechism classes, there comes the judgment.

In this doomed enterprise, nevertheless, George Weigel starts with some formidable advantages. An experienced commentator on religion and public affairs, he is one of America's most intelligent Catholic conservatives. He has a short way with the more brainless forms of left-wing claptrap (evident here, for example, in his discussion of Cuban political rhetoric), a vigorous and well-paced style, and the ability to explain and simplify complex ideas clearly and persuasively—crucial above all in interpreting this philosopher pope. He writes out of a passionate sympathy with his subject, whom he considers to be "the most compelling public figure in the world, the man with arguably the most coherent and comprehensive vision of the human possibility in the world ahead....the compleat Christian."

Moreover, he writes, he tells us, at the express invitation of the pope, issued during a "freewheeling conversation...over roast chicken and a good local wine." In preparing this formidable doorstop of a book, therefore, he has had regular access to John Paul II, in person and in writing, and the active cooperation of the Vatican bureaucracy. This is as near to the official view of the pontificate as we are likely to get.

Weigel's account of Papa Wojtyla makes two essential claims. In the first place, he insists, the pope is the best and truest interpreter of the theological vision of Vatican II, authoritative not authoritarian, moving beyond the stereotypes of liberal or conservative to offer a deeply evangelical understanding of the sources of renewal opened up by the council, winnowing with a sure hand the pernicious sixties chaff from the golden grain of genuine conciliar reform. He emphasizes Wojtyla's role in the formulation of the council's pastoral *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, and insists that the pope's reading of the relation of the gospel to modernity is to be preferred to all others.

The second and related claim is that Wojtyla's philosophical humanism, emphasizing the fundamental dignity of human beings as free moral subjects, provides the providential antidote to the emptiness of modern atheism and secularism. The pope's teaching, he believes, provides the basis for a reorientation not only of Catholic moral theology, but of the church's conversation with secular culture, the implications of which will take generations to explore.

These are heady claims, but they are in line with Weigel's generally astral assessment of the stature and impact of his hero. It is hard to blame him. Wojtyla is by any standards a titanic human being, and his Polish career alone, told here in fascinating and moving detail, reads like the stuff of sensational fiction, rather than the sober fact it is: the austere and orphaned childhood; the wartime career as quarry worker and secret seminarian; the remarkable ministry as university chaplain and philosophy professor, conducted in canoes and mountain-climbing shelters as often as in lecture rooms,

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inspiring and sustaining a generation of young intellectuals, to whom he became (and remains) their own priest and friend *Wujek*; the cold-warrior bishop, appointed at the virtual insistence of an eager Communist regime, which discovered too late that it had helped promote its most wily and formidable opponent; the daring philosopher-poet, exploring and celebrating the moral meaning of human sexuality; the old-fashioned ascetic, thinly clad in shabby clothes, giving his blankets to the poor, spending whole nights prostrate before the tabernacle, like something from a film on the Curé d'Ars.

Weigel's enterprise runs into trouble, however, once Wojtyla becomes John Paul II. In part this is because of the sheer shapeless density of any papacy, and above all so long and hyperactive a papacy—by Weigel's count almost 90 foreign visits involving more than 3,000 addresses, 134 pastoral visits within Italy, 700 pastoral visits in Rome, 13 encyclicals, 9 apostolic constitutions, 36 apostolic letters, 600 *ad limina* addresses, 877 general audiences. Weigel does his best to impose some sort of order on this riot of material, and he has an enviable gift of narrative and expository compression. Inexorably, however, the story degenerates into one damn thing after another, and turning the page becomes less and less enticing: It is difficult to imagine anyone other than a reviewer reading the book from cover to cover.

More seriously, Weigel's total commitment to a single point of view eventually erodes the reader's trust. Weigel is understandably determined to defend John Paul from a predictable range of accusations—that he is a misogynist, that he is authoritarian, that he does not believe in episcopal collegiality, that he has been deaf to the plight of the poor in Latin America, that he has discouraged theological creativity. The list goes on. Weigel often has serious points to make against these charges, but he sacrifices credibility for his argument by reducing all disagreement with the pope's point of view to a thin chorus of sour voices off-stage. In all but a handful of instances, such as the appointment of Archbishop Jozef Glemp as primate of Poland, he refuses to consider seriously the possibility that the pope may be capable of errors of judgment, or that more than one view of an issue may be possible.

Weigel's lack of distance from his hero undermines his credibility as an apologist.

While pointing, quite rightly, to some of John Paul's more imaginative and successful episcopal appointments, for example, that of Cardinal Carlo Martini of Milan, he is startlingly silent about the many notoriously imprudent and divisive appointments which have resulted from the Vatican's concern to install safe conservatives. He counters the claim that the pope does not believe in collegiality by emphasizing, quite rightly, the dramatic increase of papal contact with the world's bishops which has resulted from the pope's journeyings and from the reforms of the *ad limina* procedures which John Paul has instituted, and he emphasizes also the pope's deserved reputation as a good listener, one-to-one. He never addresses, however, the almost universal criticism of the centralized stage managing of synods, nor the widespread sense in local hierarchies, by no means confined to radicals and malcontents, that they are increasingly perceived in Rome as branch managers of an international company. Weigel apparently sees nothing uncollegial (or counterproductive) in the pope's addressing the mute Brazilian hierarchy for four hours in 1980, in order, as Weigel says, to "remind them of their mission," or in the fact that John Paul routinely uses his *ad limina* addresses, according to Weigel, to teach his fellow bishops.

Weigel's blind spots become evident in his virtual silence about the pope's coolness toward figures like Oscar Romero or Helder Camara, and in Weigel's woefully simplistic account of liberation theology (which, so far as I could see from his footnotes, appears to be based on two journal articles published in 1973). In defending John Paul's "shock therapy for the Jesuits," the pope's astonishing suspension of the constitution of the order in 1981, and his imposition on it of the rule of a blind octogenarian as his personal delegate, Weigel says next to nothing about Pedro Arrupre, general at the time, who was then and after his death remains a revered figure, arguably the order's most charismatic leader since Ignatius, and a man broken by the pope's action.

In the end, Weigel's lack of distance from his hero undermines his credibility as an apologist. He has no doubts at all about the wisdom—or the abiding effect—of the pope's mass rallies. He enthusiastically celebrates John Paul's skill in "working the crowds," and assumes that celebrity changes lives, and indeed the course of history. He appears seriously to attribute the arrival of "stable democracy" in Chile, for example, to the pope's brief visit there in 1987. He is convinced that in one or two generations' time we will see a church and world transformed by the impact of the crowds of young people who chant "John Paul Two, we love you" at the pope's youth rallies, an optimism which seems reminiscent of the peace dreams of the flower-power generation, and about as likely. He thinks that the way to rebut the charge that theological creativity has been stifled in this pontificate is to point to the pope's own encyclicals.

That in itself is a revealing strategy. Weigel is absolutely right to celebrate the splendor of the gift which the church has received in the talents and pastoral dedication of John Paul II. He is disastrously wrong in implying that in the creative if sometimes cacophonous conversation of Catholicism after Vatican II, John Paul's is the only voice worth listening to. □

Eamon Duffy *is Reader in Church History in the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Magdalene College. He is the author of* The Stripping of the Altars *and* Saints and Sinners, *a history of the popes, both published by Yale University Press.*

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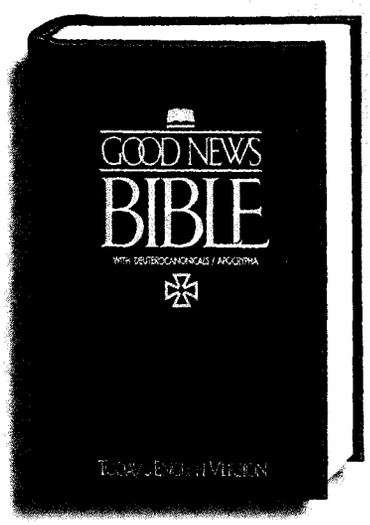

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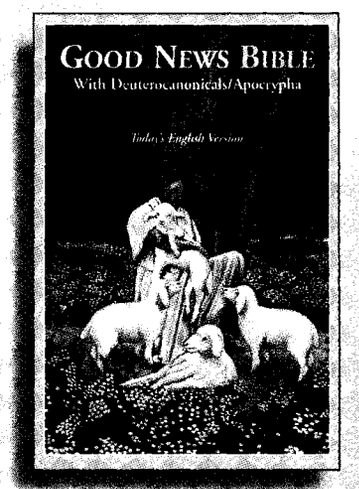

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DON'T TREAD ON ME

A Necessary Evil
A History of American Distrust of Government
Garry Wills
Simon and Schuster, $24.50, 343 pp.

John McGreevy

Does Garry Wills write faster than I read? The arrival of Wills's latest book, *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government*, prompts this disturbing thought. As I write this review Wills's biography of Saint Augustine, published to critical acclaim six months ago, lies half read on my nightstand. The September issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* contains an incisive essay on Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address that develops topics first elaborated in Wills's Pulitzer prize-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. I only skimmed the book on John Wayne. In the last two years Wills has published substantial essays on, among other topics, Italian silent film, Greek sculpture, Jesse Ventura, the Sundance film festival, President Bill Clinton, and the *Iliad*. In the last forty years I count twenty-one books. And not even Wills, I'm guessing, bothers to count the reviews, newspaper columns, and articles.

The term "public intellectual" is a weary one, and too often it means the print equivalent of Larry King. Or a deadly reiteration, recycled in various media, of one long-held, slightly suspect idea. But Wills remains the real, sometimes the only, thing. At his best he delves into the literature on his chosen subject, avoiding the disdain for scholarly argument that among some commentators masks an unwillingness to complicate convenient assertions. He then emerges with a provocative interpretation of (take your pick) religion and American politics, the Declaration of Independence, American Catholicism, Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan, that challenges specialists even as the clarity of his prose attracts the elusive general reader.

A Necessary Evil rests firmly in this canon, although not at the top rank. The book originated as Wills observed the Republican success during the 1994 congressional elections and the subsequent antigovernmental rhetoric that accompanied the standoff between the House of Representatives and President Clinton. And too, Wills noted the ways in which figures as disparate as David Koresh and Oliver Stone warned of an overreaching state.

The basic argument is unexceptionable: that Americans piled a suspicion of the Constitution, a frontier tradition, and a cult of the gun onto "the general anti-authoritarian instincts of mankind." Our history, and false readings of that history, make Americans susceptible to a naïve faith in the local group. We contrast the supposed effectiveness of guerrilla warfare in revolutionary South Carolina and Vietnam with lumbering armies. We ponder term limits for public officials as a mechanism for returning government to "the people."

Wills upends several antigovernmental shibboleths. The founders did not believe in state sovereignty; the three branches of government exist not to check federal power but to make its exercise more efficient. Secessionists received a "definitive refutation" of their constitutional claims from Abraham Lincoln, Daniel Webster, and Andrew Jackson.

"A highly-placed administration spokesman said today, 'Help!—I'm surrounded by idiots!'"

He is especially concerned that a broad interpretation of the right to bear arms not receive further sanction. National Rifle Association publicists like to compare their efforts to those of the Lexington minutemen, but colonial militias, in fact, did little to aid the revolutionary war effort. One historian calls them "more noisy than useful." Most families did not even own a gun. As Wills puts it, "Then there was one gun for every ten people in the colonies. Now there are more than one for every man, woman, and child in America....Yet this latter situation is justified by appeal to the former."

The academic supporters of this broad antigovernmental impulse come in for careful scrutiny. It is, after all, startling to find prominent legal scholars discovering a right to armed resistance of the government, a right emanating from a putatively antigovernment climate in 1787. And Wills demolishes arguments against the constitutionality of standing armies or even the army's ability to choose its own soldiers.

Where Wills is less persuasive, for all his historical acumen, is in his analysis of the origin of our current dilemma. The logic of *A Necessary Evil* presupposes an antigovernment sentiment stretching from Patrick Henry to Idaho survivalists. But the vitriol directed at the federal government by federal employees like Congressman Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), and the violence orchestrated by a Timothy McVeigh, are genuinely new in the context of twentieth-century American life. Imagine Sam Rayburn treating the House of Representatives with the same contempt evidenced by recent waves of congressional reformers, many so suspicious of "the Beltway" that they cannot bear to spend weekends in the corrupting capital.

Instead, this mistrust stems from the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when governmental authority came under unprecedented attack. Govern-

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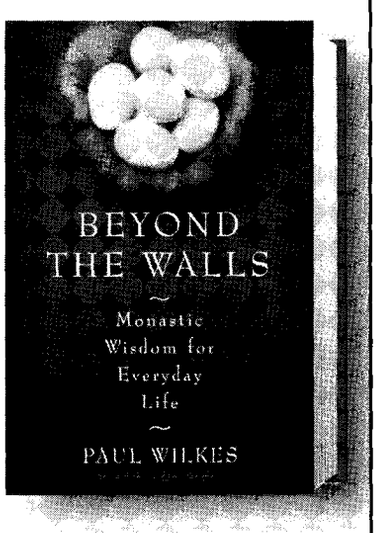

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mental officials had, after all, spied on their own citizens, and conducted an immoral and often illegal war. Conservatives typically supported the American effort in Vietnam, but attacked government with the same vehemence a decade later. Ronald Reagan's view of government was the bloated nanny state, protector of prying bureaucrats and welfare cheats. And Jack Kemp (who termed the bombing of Kosovo an "international Waco") and other conservatives now attack Clinton with the same bloodlust that student activists once reserved for Richard Nixon.

A generation after John Kennedy's call to government service, talented college graduates choosing federal employment over a career in, say, investment banking have become scarce. Attendance at political rallies, membership in political parties, and voting rates have declined. Violent resistance to the government began on the left side of the political spectrum, but the same admiration for guerrilla tactics and the local group marks both the Weatherman and the Michigan Militia.

Perhaps the broader problem is a contemporary suspicion of institutions, not just long-standing antagonism toward government. The list Wills compiles of antigovernmental attitudes—a preference for the "authentic," the "spontaneous," the "candid," and the "participatory"—could double as a dictionary for sixties-era reformers cynical about political parties, trade unions, and the nuclear family. Wills describes government as a "necessary good" and complains that "when marriages fail, we do not think it is because marriage is an evil in itself." But marriage, too, is a more fragile institution in 1999 than 1969, by causes good and bad. Wills's goal in *A Necessary Evil* is admirable—to stop Americans from loving their country by hating their government. But its achievement may depend upon social changes more far-reaching than a proper interpretation of the Second Amendment. □

John McGreevy, *the author of* Parish Boundaries *(Chicago), teaches history at the University of Notre Dame.*

ALL ABOUT EVE

Colony Girl
Thomas Rayfiel
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $23, 279 pp.

Valerie Sayers

Thomas Rayfiel's second novel is built on some terrific concepts. Its heroine, Eve ("Just Eve. No last names in the Bible"), is a member of a small religious sect outside the little town of Arhat (sounds like Ararat?), Iowa. In addition to the usual sexual dilemmas confronting turn-of-the-century American teen-agers, Eve must contend with being the favorite of the sect's founder, Gordon. It is not clear, for most of the novel, whether his prickly preference for her company will make Eve an object of his own sexual desire, his heir apparent in the preaching department, an enabler of his recent bizarre fascination with satellite TV, or some combination of all of the above.

Rayfiel's coupling of Eve's religious beliefs (set, but constantly challenged) and her sexual beliefs (in formation) makes for an intriguing variation on the traditional coming-of-age story. Because Eve is also simultaneously in love with a beautiful young high-school boy, Joey, and his portly, widowed middle-aged father, Herbert, the ensuing couplings are often funny in a way that is tender rather than mocking or judgmental. Rayfiel also treats Eve's religious passions with both the respect and the irony they deserve, and there is a useful

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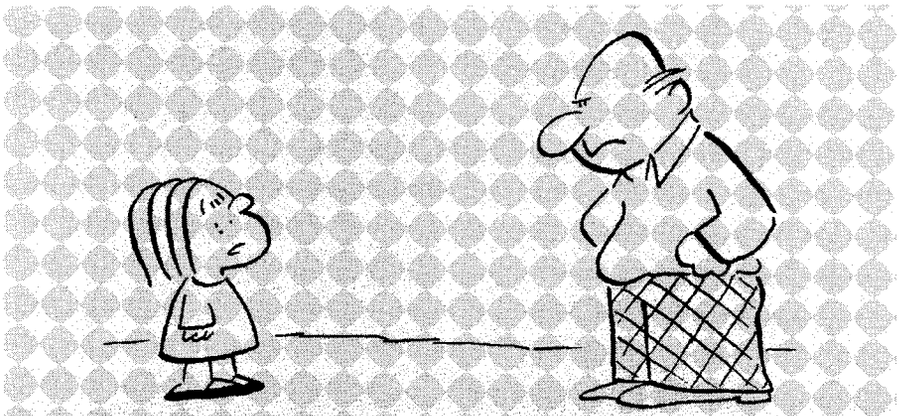

"I did tell a fib, but there was an element of truth in it."

tension throughout the telling of her story, not just between Eve's body and her beliefs but between readers and their evolving responses to her.

Rayfiel has chosen Eve's fifteen-year-old voice to tell the story, a perfectly reasonable narrative decision, and one that has its charms: Because she is feisty and iconoclastic, the narrative is especially appealing when she's ranting or making some deadly accurate adolescent observation of adults. The story begins, though, in the cadences of an intelligent adult, not a teen-ager, and the conventional narrative voice (sometimes it's even a little bland) is often less interesting than the events it describes. Eve tends to explain obvious things at length, particularly her emotions, her existence as a girl, and the most familiar trials of being a teen-ager ("I banged into things. I didn't know where I was, where I began and ended, from one day to the next"). Her musings about males have a peculiar filtered effect, as if they've been strained through a tidy adult consciousness (she describes another girl as having "this really dumb expression, the kind guys like because it's this absolutely blank screen they can project whatever cheap fantasy they want onto"). When Rayfiel allows her a one-liner, her voice is far more interesting. For example, when she fantasizes marrying the widower and becoming stepmother to his muscled son, she says, "I could give him baths," and the lack of further explanation is a relief.

The story's early events—Eve's experiments with alcohol, her introduction to Joey and his father, her decision to work as a highway-crew flagman—unfold as perfectly possible realistic events. The Colony itself, home to a dozen families who are "technically...Tertiary Baptist," but more tellingly in thrall to Gordon, is described in simple, nonsensational, believable terms. The Colony is a response to America's ongoing swings between rigid order and rebelliousness in matters religious and social: Gordon was once an on-the-make San Francisco street preacher, Eve's mother a promiscuous hippie. Now they are key members of a religious community that promotes fidelity, modesty, and American values rendered here in symbols as familiar as cherry pie (the Fourth of July is an important Colony holiday). Traditional sex roles are mandated: Men go out into the world, women feed them. Eve is full of challenges, but she remains faithful to Gordon's leadership and to a fairly orthodox belief in the God Gordon so flamboyantly describes. Why Gordon is willing to allow Eve her experimentation, not just in sex roles but in sex itself, is one of the plot's good mysteries.

Gordon himself is a wonderfully vivid character, and one of this novel's strengths is Rayfiel's refusal to reduce him to a bad guy (though, Lord knows, he's bad enough). He pops Demerol, drinks Everclear, and is fond of horrifying the Colony's young women with pronouncements on the order of "Men will stick it anywhere." (One of the novel's disappointments is its characters' unvarying vision of men as victims of their bodies' desires and women as superior, because they have the discipline to

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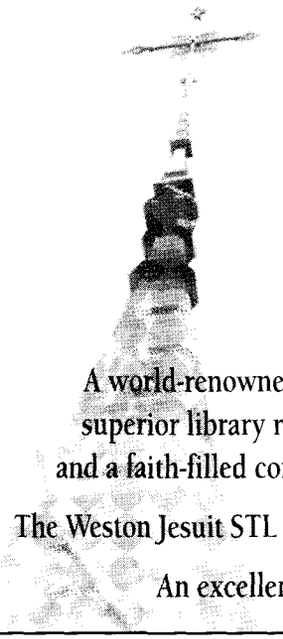

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contain their longings, which in any case are more romantic.) Gordon is Eve's father figure, and her sexual awakening is as Electran as Joey and Herbert's rivalry is Oedipal. Gordon is a huckster on the level of P. T. Barnum, and his pronouncements—"Ain't no Bible in the Bible"—are worthy of the meanest televangelists. Eve, though, can see his longing for transcendence, and that insight makes her a rich, multilayered character. Her musings on prayer, on nature, and on female friendship are Zen-like in their simplicity.

The means by which the plot points of her story are resolved, however, tend toward the fantastic, or at least the melodramatic. It's hard to buy some of the story's early manipulations (that Herbert, for example, brings the fifteen-year-old to a local bar where, uncarded and apparently unremarked, she has him buy her a couple of beers), but it would be ridiculous to accept some of the later ones. Eve, such an interesting soul in the novel's early pages, functions as fantasy fulfiller by the end, when she performs a literal striptease and a literary transformation. Part of the difficulty is that she has never completely found her voice, but part of it may be, too, that she bears so many conceptual burdens. Her story's ending, at least as far as this novel takes it, is pretty pat, too pat for the promising and complicated ideas on which it is built. Like Eve, *Colony Girl* is full of spitfire and promise, but it is not fully formed. It is, however, an engaging read throughout, and it is certainly a harbinger of challenging fiction to come from Thomas Rayfiel. □

Valerie Sayers, *professor of English at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of five novels, including* Brain Fever *(Doubleday).*

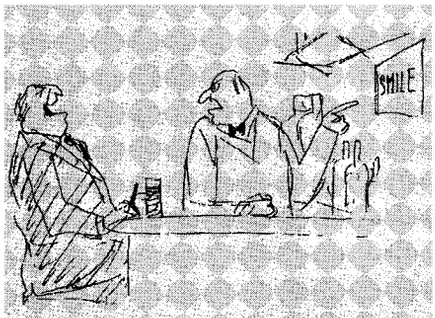
LEFT OUTSIDE

Don't Think, Smile!
Notes from a Decade of Denial
Ellen Willis
Beacon Press, $24, 192 pp.

Eugene McCarraher

Although Ellen Willis's new collection of essays on the passing decade covers a range of cultural and political episodes—*les affaires* Lewinsky, Jones, and Hill, the Simpson and King trials, the Million Man March, *The Bell Curve* imbroglio, feminist infighting over censorship—her broader concern is the sorry but redeemable state of the American Left. Voicing a proud and unyielding desire for a "freer, saner, more pleasurable way of life," the New Left of the 1960s, she reminds us, once beckoned us to a life beyond the pursuit of higher property values, and demanded the elevation of freedom, pleasure, and joy to the status of fundamental and inalienable rights. By affirming this "democratic, libertarian radicalism," Willis poses powerful if not always convincing challenges to the complacency of our time.

A former staff writer at the *Village Voice*, Willis now occupies a post at New York University, a venue whose "not pampered but merely humane" conditions provide a touchstone for cultural criticism. In her previous work, Willis has defended, among other things, sexual freedom, unrestricted abortion, and the liberating potential of pornography and rock music. I'd sign on (with reservations) only to the very last of those positions. Even so, her current book exhibits her signature clarity, argumentative dexterity, and moral passion—even if "morality" is, for an unrepentant Reichian like Willis, the chafing underwear of the bourgeois patriarchy.



"Damn it, does it say 'Laugh'?"

What passes for morality and common sense when the Dow is the barometer of our social climate? "Don't even think about it," is Willis's answer as she summarizes the warnings of businessmen, politicians, and their legion of flaks in the punditocracy. Don't even think about racism, sexism, maldistributed wealth, ecological despoliation, and especially not the possibility of better ways to arrange our affairs. Only the p.c. and the unportfolioed worry over such things.

Excoriating the smug and celebratory moralism that pervades so much of contemporary public discussion, Willis calls into question hard work and meritocracy as well as the more obvious evils of racial bigotry and sexual inequality. True to form, she inveighs about the meretriciousness of family, community, religion, and other idols of the tribe. And in one of her finest passages, she argues that hard work is neither useful as an exercise nor desirable as an ethic. Why, she asks with eminent utopian sense, is labor in even the most stupefying, harmful, and/or ill-paid job an "index of moral and spiritual worth"? (Her eminently correct answer: The work ethic discredits dissent and propels accumulation.)

Yet Willis doesn't find the Left very inspiring. The hysterical liberal response to *The Bell Curve* signaled, she contends, not a clear moral consensus against racism but the conflicted racial feelings of liberals themselves, as well as their determination to stifle discussion of class (the main subject of *The Bell Curve*, as she usefully reminds us). The cultural Left or "identity politics" with which she identifies most unambiguously has come to rely far too heavily on centralized authority to promote tolerance and

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recognition. She observes that affirmative action, though "useful," functions both as a recruitment vehicle for the professional-managerial elite and prolongs the Left's "reflexive and misplaced reliance on an increasingly recalcitrant state." Willis also recoils from the fusion of class politics and progressive nationalism advocated by Richard Rorty, Michael Tomasky, and others as an antidote to "identity politics." Class itself is an identity, she notes shrewdly (and a surreptitiously white, male, blue-collared one at that, she suspects), and the nation-state, however "progressive," is imperiled by capitalist globalization.

A new New Left, she counters, must be utopian and (though she doesn't use the word) anarchistic. All the great social movements of this century began with a "visionary minority" which, though derided at first as impractical, crazy, and/or immoral, captured the popular imagination by "presenting another possible world" and expressing "the secret hopes even of the resigned and the cynical." But these hopes must seek fruition not through the state—ultimately a tool of the oppressors, Willis warns—but in an array of decentralized institutions and experiments. Let a hundred flowers bloom.

Suffused by a romantic and intelligent magnanimity, these essays abound with nuggets of insight: the erasure of gender from the Simpson case; the accelerating industrialization of professional as well as manual labor; the ambivalence of Americans about "the culture wars" as a sign of cultural radicalism's "enormous and lasting impact." Yet they also contain a stock of polemical cowchips. Her lame defense of Bill Clinton (to her, he's a neurotic, social-climbing Lothario wisely tolerated by a sexually enlightened public) makes no reference to the First Couple's serial duplicity and ruthlessness, and dares not plumb the meaning of the public's happy conjunction of sexual tolerance and political conservatism. Throughout, Willis's indictments of "Judeo-Christian morality" as a pathological condition of self-hatred and coercion never get beyond secularist boilerplate, and cannot be respected by anyone with a modicum of historical or religious literacy.

This last shortcoming is telling, I think, because it underscores the impoverished and assimilable way in which Willis formulates those "secret hopes" of the subaltern. Beholden to the cultural-studies chestnut that consumer culture is a hotbed of "resistance," Willis testily dismisses arguments that "freedom" and "pleasure" have been easily absorbed—if not defined—by the bourgeois, slightly less male-dominated order. Her characterization of anticonsumerism as "the puritanism of the Left" reduces it to moralism and obscures its sophisticated charges against consumer culture: the encouragement of political apathy, the anxious and joyless treadmill of purchasing, the conversion of "resistance" into commodified pacification. The ease with which Willis's agenda of desire has been counterfeited suggests that the Left will have to lift repression of longings that are more basic and intractable—redemptive, one should say—than it has dared to acknowledge. □

Eugene McCarraher *teaches history at Villanova University.*

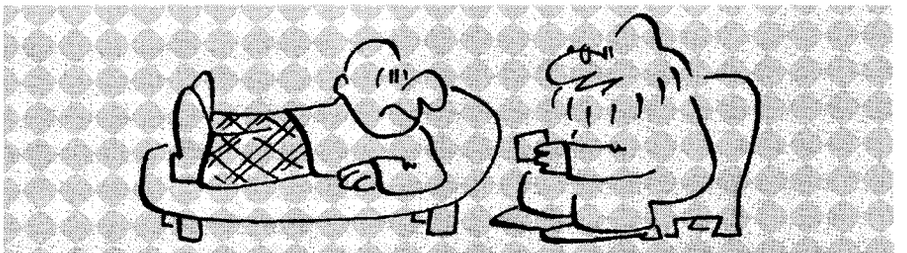
THE ABYSS OF SADNESS

Where the Roots Reach for Water
A Personal and Natural History of Melancholia
Jeffery Smith
North Point Press, $24, 297 pp.

F. González-Crussi

At first, this book gives you the impression that you are perusing merely an autobiographical account of psychological depression. The narrative is vivid, it is insightful, and it has an unmistakable ring of authenticity. You read on, and you discover that there is more here than a strictly clinical description: human suffering, in the raw, is laid bare. The aching heart floats disabled in a choppy, dark sea of hopelessness. Nor is this pure metaphor: The magnitude of the distress is oceanic; its immensity oppresses, its fathomless depth drowns the mind. It cannot be willed away. It suffocates and constricts, and reason is powerless against its progress. It bubbles up from the deep, no one knows exactly whence, and, incomprehensible, unopposable force that it is, overwhelms the susceptible consciousness without any possibility of appeal.

This is depression or melancholia, powerfully depicted by Jeffery Smith in *Where the Roots Reach for Water*. It is telling of our mechanistic bias, that we counter the charges of this monster with barrages of psychotropic drugs. After all, is this not "The Age of Prozac," as the author reminds us? In official circles, the 1990s were hailed as the "Decade of the Brain," when unprecedented advances in the behavioral sciences and in neurobiology allowed the discovery of brain receptors specific for various neurotransmitters and psychotropic drugs. Alas, in these progressive times an older



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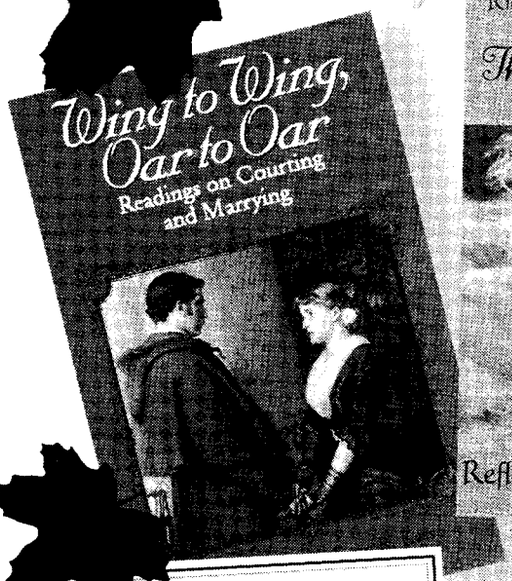

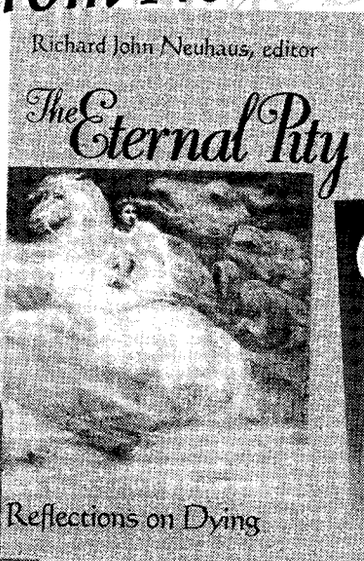

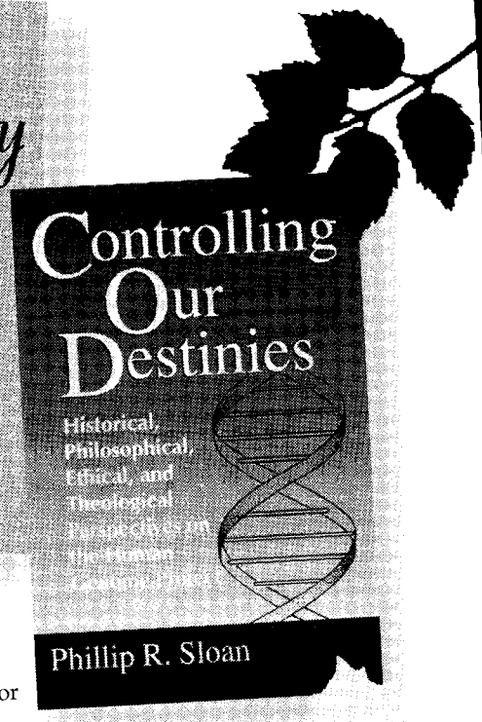

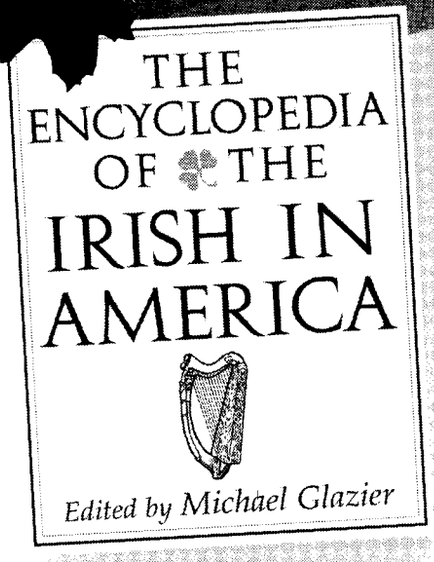

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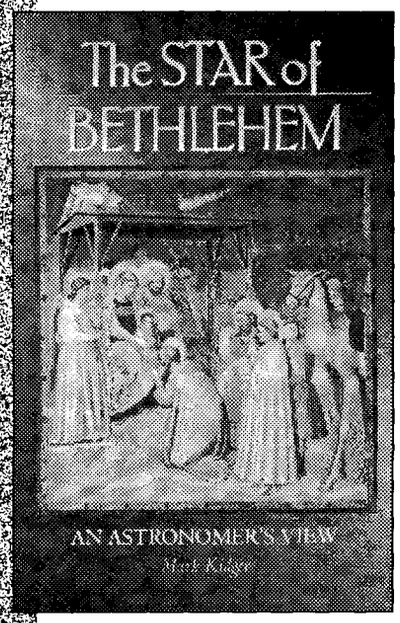

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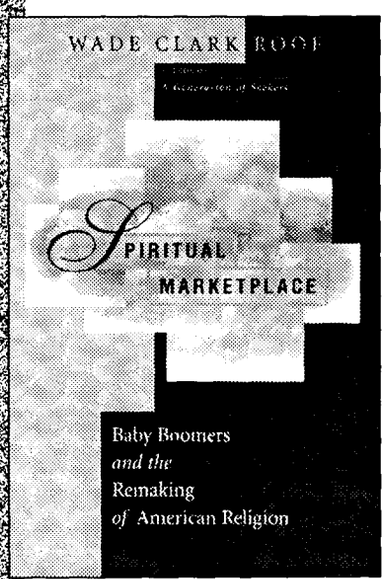

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discovery also held on steadfast, namely, that no therapeutic agent is without untoward effects, and that sometimes the remedy turns out to be, as people say, worse than the disease. This undesirable issue is engagingly portrayed by Smith as well, as he recounts a frightening episode of paralysis, the unanticipated side-effect of his intense antidepressive medication. And this leads to a short excursus on the pharmacology of the psycho-therapeutic armamentarium currently in use.

The writer then returns to his personal anguish. This desolation and loneliness, this feeling of abandonment by God and man, this "profusion of unsought trials and griefs," is it utterly senseless? What meaning can this recurrent state of mind possibly have? Perhaps it is a flash of true perception; a moment's realization, usually denial, that the world of reality is illumined by a black sun. It may be one of the necessary modes of human existence, one of the obligatory paths that all must tread, some for a short span, others more or less permanently, straying deeper and deeper into darkness.

Depression, as understood clinically, is a major health problem. In the United States, 7 percent of women and about 2.6 percent of men will suffer one major episode of depression during their lifetime. After childbirth, one in a thousand women will experience serious (requiring hospitalization or posing a real threat to themselves and to their infants) postpartum depression—to say nothing of the millions of persons who abuse alcohol or drugs, and who, though clearly depressive, escape this diagnostic label in epidemiologic studies.

Depression is "the ailment of our time, germane even for those who don't have it," an expert is quoted as saying. Like death, of which it may be a premonition, it is a strong inducement to reflect on the meaning of individual existence. Smith has obviously engaged in much reflection on this malady, "the most existential illness we know." A psychiatric case manager, he is witness to his own mind's progressive debilitation. His background has allowed him no little familiarity with the pangs, and

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the unpredictability, of mental illness; now he experiences the evolution of the disease as a victim. Immediacy of experience, combined with a detached objectivity that years of engagement in his habitual occupation have bred in his outlook, and, no doubt, a gift for forceful, at times lyrical expression, lend to the pages of *Where the Roots Reach for Water* a unique appeal.

Having clarified that depression is more—much more—than neural circuitry in disarray, Smith's survey is not confined to the medical level. Through the use of an effective, elegant prose, maneuvered with such deftness as leads us to expect much from this writer in the future, he unveils for us a complexity that goes far beyond the realm of biological disease. In his quest, he is led to discover the Christian mystics, and concludes that "theologizing" depression may be a way "of making something out of this negative force," a rare chance to remake the self or to reach a new equilibrium.

The reader is likely to be rewarded who follows this writer in his assiduous canvassing of many levels of understanding, from biological to spiritual, of his topic. The approach is circuitous: now a biological disquisition, now a fragment of personal experience, then a historical review or a learned note, and back again to autobiography. Thus, his quest may seem tangled, but it is purposeful. It is a tortured search for meaning in hopelessness. "Tortured" may be taken here in both literal and figurative senses: an agonizing digging into a personal hell, and an investigation made of many strands that intertwine. All this is aptly embodied in the image of tree roots that reach for water, which Smith describes so well: "long tongues [that] tangle and twine and branch toward water. Hell-bent they are, but for good reason [...] all these shapes they take as they reach into the unknown, accomplish their end: to draw life from the dirt." □

F. González-Crussi *is head of the department of pathology at Children's Memorial Hospital of Chicago. His latest book is* There Is a World Elsewhere.

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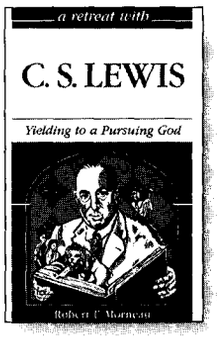

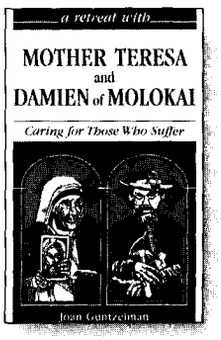

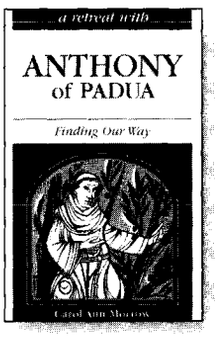

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Scribner, $26, 368 pp.

Molly Finn

Five years after landing in New York as a penniless, pimply faced nineteen-year-old with rotten teeth, infected eyes, a strong brogue, and a headful of romantic ideas about America, Frank McCourt is sitting in a classroom at NYU listening to the instructor reading Frank's assigned essay aloud: "Why he gave me an A, that my style is direct, my subject matter rich....He tells me I should continue to explore my rich past." The essay, titled "The Bed," is a typical piece of McCourt writing. In about five hundred words it describes in detail how the family came into possession of a "new" bed at the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, wheeled it home in three installments on top of the baby in his bockety-wheeled pram, dragged it upstairs, put it together, spread over it the old overcoats they used in lieu of sheets and blankets, and had a comforting cup of tea. In this brief sketch McCourt manages to portray the essential characters and personalities of his parents and give a convincing picture of the life the family led. Rich subject matter? Rich imagination, brilliant selection of expressive details, unerring choice of words. If you wanted to draw a lesson from Frank McCourt's writing it might be that any subject matter is rich in the hands of a master. McCourt is a genius of the particular.

Angela's Ashes, the brilliant first volume of McCourt's memoirs, is an assemblage of particulars. So, to a lesser extent, is *'Tis*, which begins exactly where *Angela's Ashes* leaves off, with Frank's return to America to seek his fortune. It ends in 1985 with the death of both his parents. The voice is the same; the innocence, naiveté, and humor remain recognizable throughout Frank's young adulthood.

McCourt's focus on particular details of his life lends a piercing truthfulness to his work and preserves him from the pitfalls that lie in wait for so many writers of memoirs. We are led through a late adolescence and young adulthood refreshingly free of breast beating, navel gazing, soul searching. Painfully aware of his red eyes ("like pissholes in the snow") and rotten teeth, he confesses envy of tanned, clear-eyed, white-toothed American suburbanites, but knows their lot will never be his. He wishes he could be

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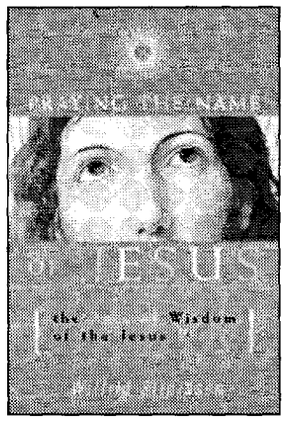

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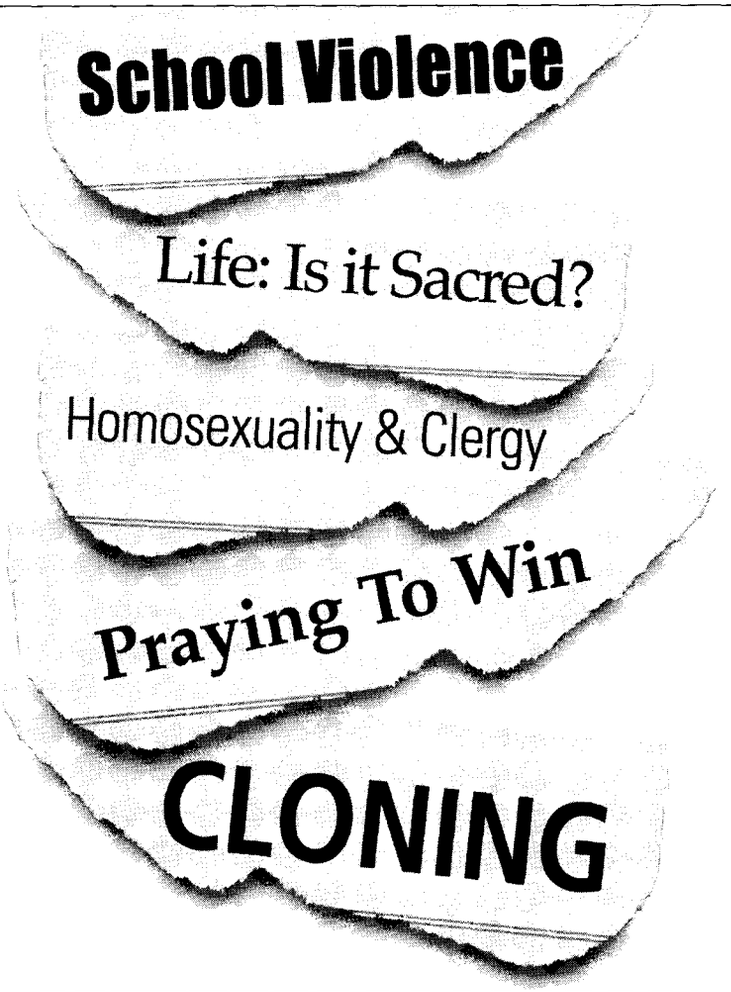
like his friend DiAngelo, "making up my own mind about everything, not giving a fiddler's fart, like my uncle Pa Keating back in Limerick." That's an eloquent expression of a characteristic longing that persists through McCourt's life. Toward the end of the book he writes, "Why can't I have a bright, carefree life like my brothers Malachy and Michael, uptown in the bar serving drinks to beautiful women and bantering with Ivy League graduates?"

In his own words "I was always on the periphery—like my father, an outsider." Almost always with a touch of humor and self-ridicule Frank the outsider leads us through his world as he works in the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel cleaning up after his rich, tanned, educated contemporaries; as he blunders his way through a hitch in the army during the Korean War; as he struggles to earn his living loading and unloading trucks at warehouses in the Bronx, the butt of the vicious and vulgar taunts of his fellow workers. He lives in a dismaying series of rooms; in the worst of them twelve men share two bath towels for two weeks at a time until one of the boarders rebels and buys his own towel. With his characteristic good humor, McCourt writes in appreciation: "We'll miss [Peter], the way he opened up the world of towels to us...."

At NYU on the G.I. Bill, Frank is more the outsider than ever—poor, foreign, socially inept, unsophisticated ("I know from the way they say it that *bubkes* isn't good and that's another word I have to look up along with existentialism"). The constant struggle gets to him once in a while and "I wonder why I left Limerick at all. If I'd stayed there and taken the exam I'd be a postman now strolling from street to street...going home for my tea without a worry in the world. I could have read Jonathan Swift to my heart's content not giving a fiddler's fart whether he was a satirist or a seanachie."

Frank is carried through these vicissitudes by the same liveliness, diligence, and pluck that served him in his account of his childhood. In private, Frank is stuffing himself with the world's best books and trying to puzzle out the big



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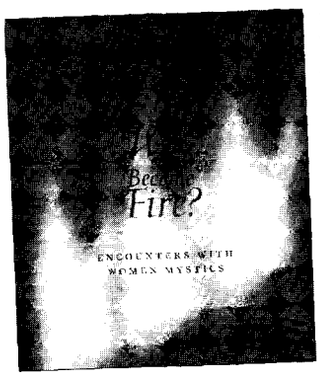

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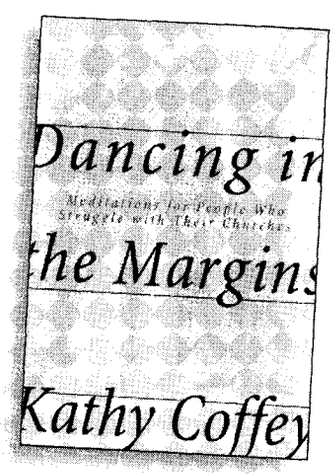

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questions. Plagued by the guilt he says was instilled in him by the church, he still wants to learn how to make moral distinctions and mediate questions of good and evil. Writing of a priest who tries to seduce him: "I don't have any grudge against him. He didn't hit anyone or starve anyone and...what he did was not as bad as running off to England and leaving your wife and children to starve the way my father did but what he did was bad because he's a priest and they're not supposed to murder people or interfere with them in any way."

Though he envies his Uncle Pa for his defiant spirit, what he admires most is his uncle's truthfulness: "You could never imagine Uncle Pa telling a lie." During his army stint, Frank finds himself on laundry detail in Dachau. In one of the most astonishing passages in the book he wonders about the Germans he meets there, how much they know, whether they have dark memories in their heads. He tries to absorb the camp by touching the ovens. "I don't know if it's proper to say the Our Father touching the door of an oven but it seems harmless enough and it's what I say hoping the Jewish dead will understand my ignorance."

'Tis as a sequel to *Angela's Ashes* ends a little more than halfway through the book, with Frank's graduation from NYU, the beginning of his teaching career, and his marriage. The fully adult life is presented with familiar pungency, wit, and mild self-mockery, but the voice has changed. The narrator is more distant, less open. People in his life need privacy; he has a daughter to protect. The vignettes of his life as a teacher are sometimes interesting, often charming, occasionally revealing. But the familiar intimacy appears only in the accounts of his parents' deaths. Taking *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis* as a single work, we have come to know these parents so deeply that their deaths are a loss for us as well as for their children.

Returning to Limerick after many years away, McCourt runs into an acquaintance on the street.

"I suppose you notice all kinds of changes in Limerick."

"Oh, yes. More cars, fewer snotty

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noses and scabby knees. No barefoot children. No women in shawls."

"Jesus, Frankie McCourt, them's peculiar things to be noticing."

Frank McCourt deserves our gratitude for noticing peculiar things and making them eloquent. □

Molly Finn, a *frequent* Commonweal *contributor, lives in New York City.*

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

libly defined by an act of the extraordinary magisterium, it is infallibly taught by means of the ordinary and universal magisterium, described by John Paul II as "the usual expression of the church's infallibility." Can or should Catholics dissent from authoritative teaching? I don't think so. Perhaps what is needed is greater effort placed on the education of one's conscience, which, as the *Catechism* relates, "is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teaching" (# 1783).

(REV.) M.F. O'MALLEY
Caldwell, N.J.

Emerging truth

Thanks to Sidney Callahan for adding her voice to the Catholic community's struggle for the elusive but deeper truth about homosexuality. She reminds me of two other Catholic voices reflecting on our history of moral development.

Karl Rahner (*Schriften zur Theologie 13*, 1978): "But it is part of the tragic and irreducibly obscure historicity of the church, that in both theory and practice it used bad arguments to defend moral maxims based on problematic, historically conditioned pre-convictions, 'prejudices'....This dark tragedy of the church's intellectual history is so burdensome because we are dealing here, in all or very many cases, with questions that penetrated deeply into the concrete lives of human beings, because such false maxims, which were never objectively valid...placed burdens on people...that from the standpoints of the freedom of the

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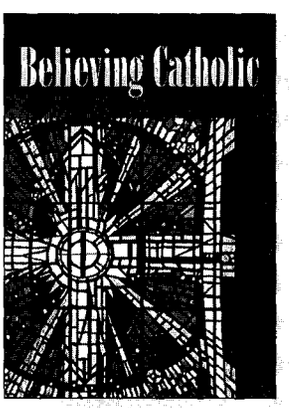

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gospel were not legitimate."

In *America* (April 3, 1999), John Noonan sketches five areas of moral change in Catholic teaching where "the impermissible becomes permissible (certain marriages, once classed as adulterous; lending with the intention to profit from the loan); the permissible becomes impermissible (slaveholding, the common use of the death penalty); and the obligatory becomes forbidden (state repression of heresy)."

In the future, as in the past, we can expect moral wisdom to emerge from the larger community engaged in conscientious dialogue. Thanks for continuing to do your part. JACK GLASER
Santa Ana, Calif.

The writer replies:

Thanks to Jack Glaser for understanding why I cannot accept the present teaching on homosexuality as eternal truth. Ours is an ever-reforming church that in its history has changed its moral teaching.

One way this happens is through a reinterpretation of scriptural texts. With more knowledge of Scripture new meanings are discovered in God's word. I assure Mark Chance that many scriptural scholars today think that the biblical references to homosexuality have been inappropriately interpreted to shore up a shaky moral argument.

I agree completely with Father O'Malley's points on the importance of conscience and the need to inform one's conscience. I've read everything I could supporting the church's teaching. But to say one *cannot* dissent from authoritative teaching would mean that conscience is no longer free. Our tradition is clear that even if your conscience is in error you must follow it.

I pray that I am not in error. I don't think faithful struggles over difficult moral issues help "pave the way to hell," as Mark Chance has it. Why can't Catholics learn to disagree without accusing one another of disloyalty to God? SIDNEY CALLAHAN

Missing: the Middle East

One hopes that *Commonweal* readers have other means of access to reflective pieces on the situation in the Middle

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East, for a cursory look at the past year's issues can only reveal how desultory is your coverage of this region, concentrating two cultures and three Abrahamic faiths. The most notable exception was Gabriel Said Reynolds's insight into the ecumenical monastery Mar Musa in Syria ["Where Islam and Christianity Meet," March 12]. More typical was the latest "Last Word" ["The Promised Land," September 24], Hebron through the eyes of an innocent American, a self-styled "secular Jew" who joins "an entourage of American Orthodox Jews who are making a religious pilgrimage." A little preliminary briefing would have informed him that this community of settlers had nourished the "faith" of Rabin's assassin, and that the words of David Wilder, the "fortyish former American who is the spokesperson for the embattled Jewish community in Hebron": "We want peace, but we're not leaving. We're here to stay," are belied by the graffiti on their walls, in Hebrew, reading "Death to Arabs." Nor are we alerted to the fact that Baruch Goldstein's massacre of "Muslims at prayer" was a premeditated action undertaken during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and executed on Purim, as a ritual enactment of the final chapter of the Book of Esther.

There is always more than meets the eye in the Holy Land, so it is crucial to know to whom one is speaking and what questions to ask them—the forté of BBC. In the absence of such correspondents in *Commonweal*, readers may consult the listserve of the Christian Peacemaker Team—*Eptheb@mail.palnet.com*—whose prolonged presence in Hebron has allowed its members to develop relationships that would easily reverse our itinerant observer's use of "embattled" to describe the settlers' presence there.

(REV.) DAVID BURRELL, C.S.C.
Notre Dame, Ind.

The writer is Theodore M. Hesburgh Professor in Arts and Sciences at the University of Notre Dame.

Science as religion

Commonweal readers interested in the controversy about science education standards in Kansas may wish to look at a special report from the *Kansas City Star*, available on the Web at *www.kcstar.com* and also at the old and new standards at *www.ksbe.state.ks.us*.

As a gloss on your excellent editorial, "Expelling Darwin" [September 10], a deeper reading than the national press allows demonstrates that the controversy was ignited not only by the sensitivity of creationists but also by the insensitivity of some of the scientists and science teachers who drew up the proposed revision. Your editorial notes the vacuum created by the exclusion of philosophy and theology from public education. This vacuum may have been partly filled by creation science, but even more so, on a number of occasions, by an overreaching secular science.

We uninvolved Catholics should at the very least be sympathetic to the reactions of fellow Christians to issues about which we may have become too insensitive.

ALFRED CAVANAUGH
Kenwood, Calif.

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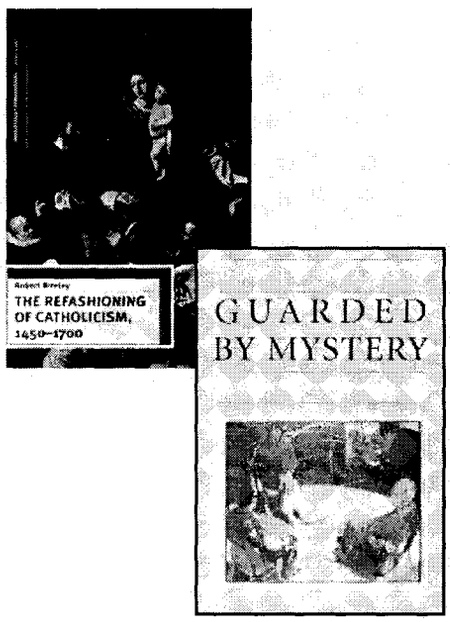

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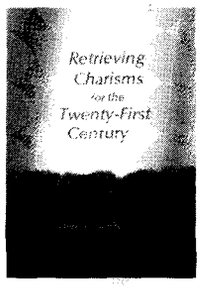

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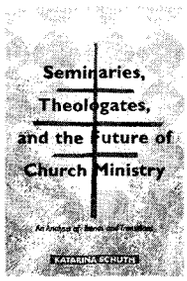

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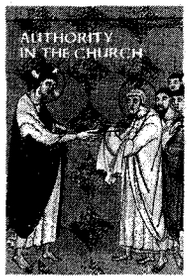

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A CORPORAL MERCY

Geoffrey Wood

I was curious that I felt so little emotion as I knelt in a front pew, close to my mother's casket, while a strange priest recited the prayers of her funeral Mass. Actually I felt numb, too weary to think or say anything by way of a eulogy, to fabricate pleasant thoughts or wade through memories or in any way fill the void while my own soul felt so empty.

But isn't that the way it is with death? Its initial impact seems to bring us up short, to cancel all thought of business as usual. Suddenly the absolute absence of someone we took for granted makes us absent-minded, wondering why? and who's next? and what's it all about? I mean, here was a life worthy of a novel! A sad-faced three-year-old girl in a 1912 photo; a 1920s flapper, complete with Louise Brooks hair style; a waitress at Abe's Oyster House, whose tips got us through the Depression; then playing Rosie the Riveter circa 1943; still bowling while practically blind in her eighties; and so on and so on and then— erased from the chalk board of human history. It makes one pause and wonder.

"Wonder about what?" says the cynic within my breast. "What did you expect? Oblivion awaits us all. We'll no more be remembered within this silent universe than last week's headlines." Or to allow that more classic materialist Buck Mulligan, the swaggering medical intern in Joyce's *Ulysses*, to express it in his terms: "And what is death, your mother's or my own? You saw only your mother die. I see them pop off every day in the Mater and Richmond and cut up into tripes in the dissecting room. It's a beastly thing and nothing else....Her cerebral lobes are not functioning. She calls doctor Sir Peter Teazle and picks buttercups off the quilt. Humor her till it's over."

Yet while I kneel there, gazing unseeing at the sanctuary floor, the celebrant's voice begins to infiltrate my benumbed brain. His words become clearer. "Now I am going to tell you a mystery," he says. "In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the last trumpet...the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. Then will the saying of Scripture be fulfilled: Death is swallowed up in victory." And again: "Lord of mercy, may our sister Mary, whom you called your daughter on earth, enter the kingdom of peace and light where your saints live in glory." And I think: Here is the great gift of my Catholic tradition, this defiance, this refusal to remain numb in the face of death, this power of imagination to envision realities that lie beyond the evidence of our senses—to take events like birth, marriage, sickness, and death and turn them into sacramental moments, embroidering them with ritual and poetry and prayers that reveal them to be so much more than ultimately meaningless biological or physical or economic phenomena.

And I say, "Yes—this and not the fatalism of Mulligan is what speaks to my heart and therefore tells me the whole truth and nothing short of the truth!" And I thank the celebrant in my heart and the lady in the choir and the people on their knees around me who testify to that traditional vision, and I turn once more to look at my mother's casket next to me, remembering another fragment of verse of that New England saint, Emily Dickinson:

A coffin—is a small domain
Yet able to contain
A rudiment of paradise
In its diminished plane.

A grave—is a restricted breadth
Yet ampler than the sun
And all the seas he populates
And lands he looks upon.

To him who on its low repose
Bestows a single friend—
Circumference without relief,
Or estimate, or end. □

Geoffrey Wood *holds degrees in theology and in Scripture. He recently retired from Sonoma County Health Services and now devotes his time to religious education in the diocese of Santa Rosa, California.*

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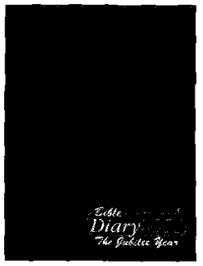

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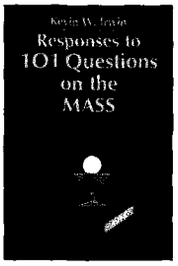

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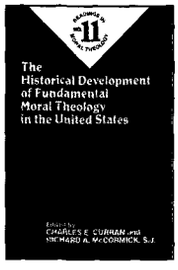

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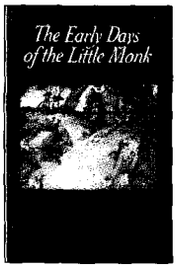

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